

A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO SOF EDUCATION FOR MAJORS

Major Michael Meumann

There are many opportunities for a field grade Special Operations Forces (SOF) officer to receive an education in the military today. These programs have much to offer for a SOF officer and meet the officer's mid-career educational requirements. Many education programs provide opportunities to increase an officer's knowledge on interagency relationships, cultural awareness and language training. While opportunities exist to learn in these three areas in various programs, they are not all together as part of a single academic program. Reorganizing several existing education programs to include these three areas into a single curriculum will lead to a more concise learning environment for SOF majors. A Special Forces Major serving as an interagency fellow stated, "Building and maintaining strong relationships between the United States Army and its governmental partners is essential to bringing forth a positive outcome in the war on terror."¹ The interagency relationship is just as important for SOF, but of equal importance is becoming regional experts and speaking a language. The ability for SOF to be innovative in education will benefit its officers and may lead to other positive educational opportunities. This will help SOF officers remain intellectually capable to solve complex problems. While SOF consists of a large number of officers, the focus of this paper is on the education of Army Special Forces officers with consideration given to the rest of SOF. It is important to make effective use of the time a SOF officer is using for education. A two-year academic program for majors of special operations should focus on interagency relationships, cultural awareness, and foreign language training as an integral part of fulfilling their education.

The Army recognizes that SF majors need a different kind of education from their conventional peers and has made some strides to address SF schooling programs. Each program offers advantages and disadvantages to an SF officer's career profession. For instance, cultural awareness and language proficiency are skills associated with SF and some institutions teach

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those skills. These key skills are essential when a SF officer conducts operations within a foreign country and understanding them is important. Just as important as having a grasp of how interagency organizations support the SF officer and the mission. Educational programs within the Army do address these three areas but none of the programs emphasizes these three areas in a single educational program. Creating an academic program that centers on the interagency while officers can improve upon their cultural awareness and language proficiency is a better alternative.

SOF officers receive limited amounts of specialized education at the major level since most of the officers attend customary military education programs. In today's military education system, the focus of intermediate level education is to teach all officers, regardless of branch, a standard educational curriculum. The education at the major level provides officers with broad topics so officers receive a general understanding of how the military operates and how it applies to the operational environment today. Institutions use a variety of historical and contemporary military examples to teach students. The services do an excellent job to educate all officers that will enhance their knowledge of the military; however, a certain group of officers requires a different kind of education to address their needs. SOF officers perform tasks not necessarily germane to conventional military officers. Special Operations officers conduct missions that require them to understand the operational and strategic environment through a different lens. SOF professionals deal with a range of areas that are not normally taught in education programs. Understanding the military and its operation is important to all officers but SOF officers need additional classes and programs that will strengthen their abilities used in their profession. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan underscore the necessity for our SOF officers to maximize their time and education while at school. This option reviews present academic programs and

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melds them together to create an all-inclusive program. There are fellowships and service educational programs in existence that incorporate these aspects that do provide SOF officers an opportunity to enhance their knowledge. Taking a closer look at several of these programs will help to understand the composition of this additional educational option.

Several educational programs meet the requirements that SOF officers can utilize to receive a nontraditional education. These programs are a good opportunity for officers to focus on aspects of education that will enhance their knowledge. One of the programs is the Olmstead Foundation Scholarship. The Olmsted Foundation Scholarship provides an opportunity for SOF officers to receive its education through immersion. The article, *Unconventional Education: SOF officers and the Olmsted Foundation Scholarship*, describes the benefits of SOF officers receiving education abroad.² The Olmsted Scholar Program selects officers to attend a university overseas to earn a master's degree. While earning a master's degree, an officer will improve his language skills by speaking the language everyday, which will make it easier for the officer to learn the culture. SOF officers work in environments that require them to understand the history of a culture and be able to communicate effectively in that language. Through diplomacy, SOF officers can assist in achieving strategic goals. An advantage of the Olmstead program is the officer will exchange thoughts and ideas with fellow classmates in an academic environment and engage in the society outside of class. The SOF officer will understand different viewpoints on world issues concerning that country. This program also fosters an environment that forges relationships with foreign students that someday may be useful in future assignments. This will provide great dividends to the SOF community but does not address the importance of a relationship with interagency partners. The program falls short in providing SOF student with academic classes such as counterinsurgency (COIN) and other specific SOF core competences

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classes. Classes in COIN and the SOF core competences is not the purpose of this program but they would be beneficial for a SOF student. During the time the officer is overseas, the student must maintain his SOF skills through the computer, which is not an effective way to remain proficient in SOF skills and tasks.

Another alternative academic program designed for SOF officers seeks to educate its students through a SOF specific curriculum with a focus on understanding interagency partners. The article, *Opportunities for ARSOF: Education at Fort Leavenworth*, describes a new program in which SOF officers enroll in a SOF academic track at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas that also leads to a master's degree.³ The SOF program is in addition to the intermediate level education (ILE) program at Fort Leavenworth given to all field grade officers. The SOF studies program incorporates academics that focus on core competencies of SOF along with seminar discussions from SOF experts to prepare respective students for future special operations assignments. The faculty for the program is under the direction of the SOF education element at Fort Leavenworth that provides relevant curriculum from history along with references to SOF students. The program also invites guest speakers and conducts case studies and exercises that provide SOF students with a vast collection of knowledge. In addition to the SOF program, SOF officers will receive a master's degree in Interagency Studies that is integrated into the ILE curriculum. The master's degree program comes with no additional cost to the student. Making the master's program a part of the curriculum is a benefit to SOF officers since the majority, if not all, of the master's programs offered at ILE requires students to pay extra or take tuition's assistance. Another benefit of the SOF program and the master's degree in the ILE academic year is that it allows many SOF students the opportunity to spend time with families at night rather taking many additional masters' classes at night. The interagency studies program gives SOF students

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the opportunity to gain more knowledge and a better understanding of interagency partners.

Gaining this knowledge will allow SOF officers to use any interagency partner effectively while on an assignment. The SOF program is an improvement and assists SOF officers in many facets of a SOF specific education; however, it does not address cultural awareness or language proficiency.

The Army began a recent fellowship program in which officers will work with a federal agency in Washington, DC. The Interagency Fellowship Program is an effort by the Army's Command and General Staff College to allow a selected group of officers the opportunity to build a relationship with an interagency organization.⁴ The fellowship also meets the major level schooling requirement for the officer. To meet the schooling requirement for the Army, the officer will attend a three month Intermediate Level Education (ILE) common core instruction at Fort Belvoir, Maryland. The officer will complete the remainder of ILE through a distance learning program within eighteen months. Upon completion of the common core instruction, the officer is assigned to a federal agency for approximately one year. Daily exposure to an interagency will educate the officer on the agency's mission, techniques, tactics, and procedures while expanding upon the officer's expertise. A SF officer, Captain Bryan Gibb stated, "serving as an Army interagency fellow is both an outstanding professional development opportunity and an excellent mechanism for imparting company-grade officer's tactical and operational level experiences to members of a national level organization."⁵ This kind of experience is the right approach to educating for SF officers. The purpose of the fellowship does meet the Army's intent to integrate officers within the interagency. This program in part meets the intent of the Commander, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) guidance to Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) to establish the USSOCOM Interagency Education

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Program.⁶ The fellowship does show many promises but there are still questions remaining to be answered. The article does not mention the impact the fellowship has in relation to completing the distance learning portion of ILE or the possibility of incorporating a master's degree producing distance learning program. One of the main complaints about distance learning is having enough time to complete the education while conducting one's job, or fellowship, in this case. Captain Gibb does state this program is a great mechanism; however, is there an opportunity to incorporate classes on cultural awareness and language? Given the promising direction of this fellowship there are additional issues to consider.

Several of the Army educational programs offer quite a lot to SF officers but there are issues to consider when using them as a model to mix into a new educational concept. First, the main focus of this program is directed towards special operations forces officers with the initial group being special forces officers. Special operations forces are not simply made up of special forces officer but also aviators, infantrymen, and civil affairs and psychological operations officers to name a few. Where does the line need to be drawn as to which officers meet the criteria for this program? One can argue for and against an infantry officer who is part of the 75th Ranger Regiment to attend this program.

Second, the amount of officers having the opportunity to attend this kind of program may be limited. Commands may be unwilling to send SF or SOF officers away for two years. However, commanders may see the benefits and compare the educational dividend with officers attending Special Operation/ Irregular Warfare program at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California that is an eighteen-month program.⁷ In addition, the recent change within Army Special Operations Forces (ARSOF) professional development allows warrant officers and senior noncommissioned officers to attend the Naval Postgraduate School.⁸ If ARSOF expands

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its educational criteria to meet this alternative program it will create a larger collection of candidates applying to attend. Other organizations within United States Special Operations Command may want to send some of its SOF officers to this alternate program that may create problems concerning the number of available slots.

Finally, what graduate school programs in the civilian sector or within the military can provide a master's degree program for officers attending this program. The Interagency Studies Program (ISP) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas has joined with University of Kansas (KU) to provide its officers going through their program a master's degree.⁹ Would KU be willing to extend this program to officers as part of a distance learning curriculum? These questions along with funding language training, gaining points for joint credit, and willingness from the Army and USSOCOM must be answered to get a correct picture to make this program possible.

An alternative academic program combining portions of the three existing programs together with a length of two years is the best arrangement. The program is similar to the Interagency Fellowship model with extras. The officer will fulfill the educational requirement through distance learning that may produce a master's degree. The advantage of assigning the officer to a two-year tour is to provide the officer more flexibility to incorporate cultural awareness and language training opportunities. The language portion can model the Air Force's Air Command and Staff College (ACSC) language program by utilizing language contractors from the Washington, DC area through Defense Language Institute (DLI). In an interview with current German Instructor at ACSC, Mr. Harald Ritzau stated that DLI uses the Washington, DC based company, International Center for Language Studies, to help officers with language training.¹⁰ The benefits of the interagency experience expose the officer to different government capabilities and programs that will provide additional methods for learning a culture. To further

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cultural education, the interagency will send an officer on a temporary duty status to a United States Embassy for several weeks. This provides the officer hands on experience within a culture while working on foreign language skills. This alternative program enables the officer to capitalize on existing education opportunities with less relocation and the ability to stay relevant within the SOF community through daily, weekly, or monthly communication. It builds an officer's relationship with the interagency while becoming more culturally aware, improving on language proficiency, and fulfilling educational requirements with the potential of earning a master's degree under one program.

Special operations forces officers need a different kind of education since the work they conduct is different from that done by conventional officers. Because SOF officers missions, roles, and competences are different, preparing officers through effective education to operate in these environments will only increase their capability. SOF officers must find solutions to difficult problems that involve coordination with interagency organizations, a thorough understanding of culture, and the ability to speak the language. There are academic programs that teach about governmental agencies, cultural awareness and language training but focus on one or two aspects, not all. Creating an alternative academic option for special operations officers would give an officer the time to build relationships with federal agencies while utilizing opportunities for language and cultural training. The potential is great and can be a source to educate other special operations officers throughout all the services to include the prospect of educating warrant officers and noncommissioned officers through this program. It is time to educate our SOF officers to be ready to meet current and future challenges with all the necessary tools available that will win the hearts and minds of people to achieve victory.

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¹ Gibb, Cpt Bryan “Working Relationships. Interagency Exchange Program Improves Army’s Relationship with Whole of Government.” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 5 (September-October 2009): 6-7.

² Miani, Maj Lino, and Wisecup, LCDR Michael “Unconventional Education: SOF Officers and the Olmsted Foundation Scholarship.” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 3 (May-June 2009): 23-25.

³ Spence, LtCol James W., and Lessard, Lt Col Casey “Opportunities for ARSOF: Education at Fort Leavenworth” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 10-13.

⁴ Military Personnel Message 09-133. Issued 11 June 2009. US Army. To all eligible officers to attend Academic Year 2010 Intermediate Level Education (ILE) opportunities and procedures for applying to Foreign, Sister Service School and Interagency Fellowship Attendance, 11 June 2009.

⁵ Gibb, Cpt Bryan “Working Relationships. Interagency Exchange Program Improves Army’s Relationship with Whole of Government.” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 5 (September-October 2009): 6-7.

⁶ Joint Special Operations University, President’s Action Team. “Providing the Azimuth for Joint SOF Education – The Future Direction of JSOU,” Joint Special Operations University Future Concept paper, July 2008: 11.

⁷ Special Forces Branch (Active Army). “Naval Post-Graduate School (NPS).” United States Army Human Resources Command. https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/protect/Active/opsf/New_SF_Page/NPS.htm (accessed 22 November 2009).

⁸ Special Forces Career Notes. Professional Development. *Special Warfare* 22, no. 5 (September-October 2009): 25.

⁹ Spence, LtCol James W., and Lessard, Lt Col Casey “Opportunities for ARSOF: Education at Fort Leavenworth” *Special Warfare* 22, no. 1 (January-February 2009): 10-13.

¹⁰ Harald Ritzau (German language instructor at Air Command and Staff College), interview by the author, 4 December 2009.

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